

Record number of species banded in 2010 at Ninigret NWR's fall migration banding station.

How many songbird species use coastal shrub land as habitat during migration? In Rhode Island, refuge biologists are working to answer this question, and watching the number increase every year. Refuge staff and volunteers began operating a constant effort fall migration songbird banding station at Ninigret NWR, part of the Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex, in fall of 2008. The banding is part of an Adaptive Regional Management Project aimed at improving habitat on several New England refuges for migratory songbirds and New England Cottontail. In October of that first year, biologists at Ninigret were stunned by the numbers of songbirds filling the mist-nets, so many in fact, that for a few days they ran out of bird bands! Despite the setback, the refuge banded 1079 birds that year and went on to band a total of 2813 birds in 2009 and 2189 birds in 2010.

Aside from sheer numbers of birds, biologists are also interested in the diversity of species seen on the refuges. High species diversity is generally an indication of habitat quality. Habitats with many different types of available food and cover tend to support a greater number of wildlife species. At Ninigret, species diversity has increased each of the first three years of regular banding with 51, 53, and a record high of 65 species banded in 2010. New species of note banded in 2010 include Whip-poor-will, Winter Wren, Canada Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Ovenbird, Lincoln's Sparrow, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting.

In a landscape increasingly fragmented by development and deforestation, migratory birds depend on strongholds of quality habitat for foraging and roosting opportunities during their migratory journey. This issue is larger, however, than a single refuge. The availability of quality habitat along their entire migration route is vital if birds are to survive the daunting challenge of traveling thousands of miles between breeding and wintering grounds twice every year. The Adaptive Management Project includes vegetation surveys and berry counts to evaluate the quality of existing habitat at several coastal refuges in New England. Furthermore, active management is ongoing to improve the quality of the habitat for migratory birds. At Ninigret NWR, biologists have removed exotic invasive plant species, girdled and selectively removed mature trees to encourage the growth of berry-producing native shrubs, and planted more native shrubs. As we work to restore our unique coastal habitat and continue to band and survey fall migrating songbirds, the refuge staff looks forward to the fruits of our efforts and to greeting any new species of birds that seek food, rest, and shelter at Ninigret as they make their journey southward.



First Winter Wren banded at Ninigret NWR. Photograph taken by Erin King, Oct. 2010



First Lincoln's Sparrow banded at Ninigret NWR. Photograph taken by Erin King, Oct. 2010